

# When the final whistle blows: Retirement for Elite Athletes

Retirement from professional sport can be problematic with some sports people reporting considerable psychological distress and reduced well-being as a result. Increasingly we are starting to recognise the role that *identity change* plays in these transitions, particularly change in:

- **athletic identity** and
- **social identity** — our sense of belonging with the groups in our lives i.e., family, team, community, and interest groups, among others

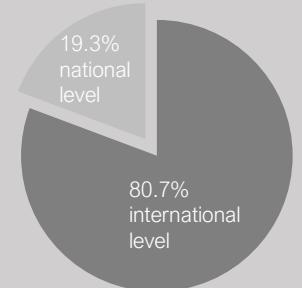
This research investigated the extent to which these factors impacted on adjustment to retirement from professional sport.



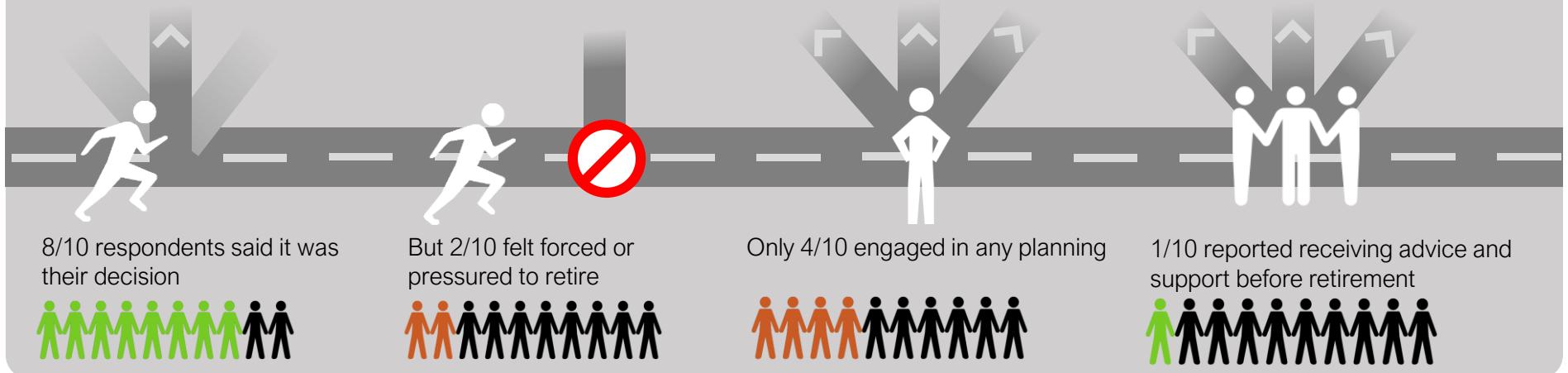
77% of people reported experiencing loss of their professional athletic identity, and every one point increase in identity loss was associated with a 5% increase in depression.

**METHOD** Sample: 239 retired elite athletes  
[63% Belgian; 7% Italian; 7% Netherlands, 5% Spain, 5% Australian; 13% other]

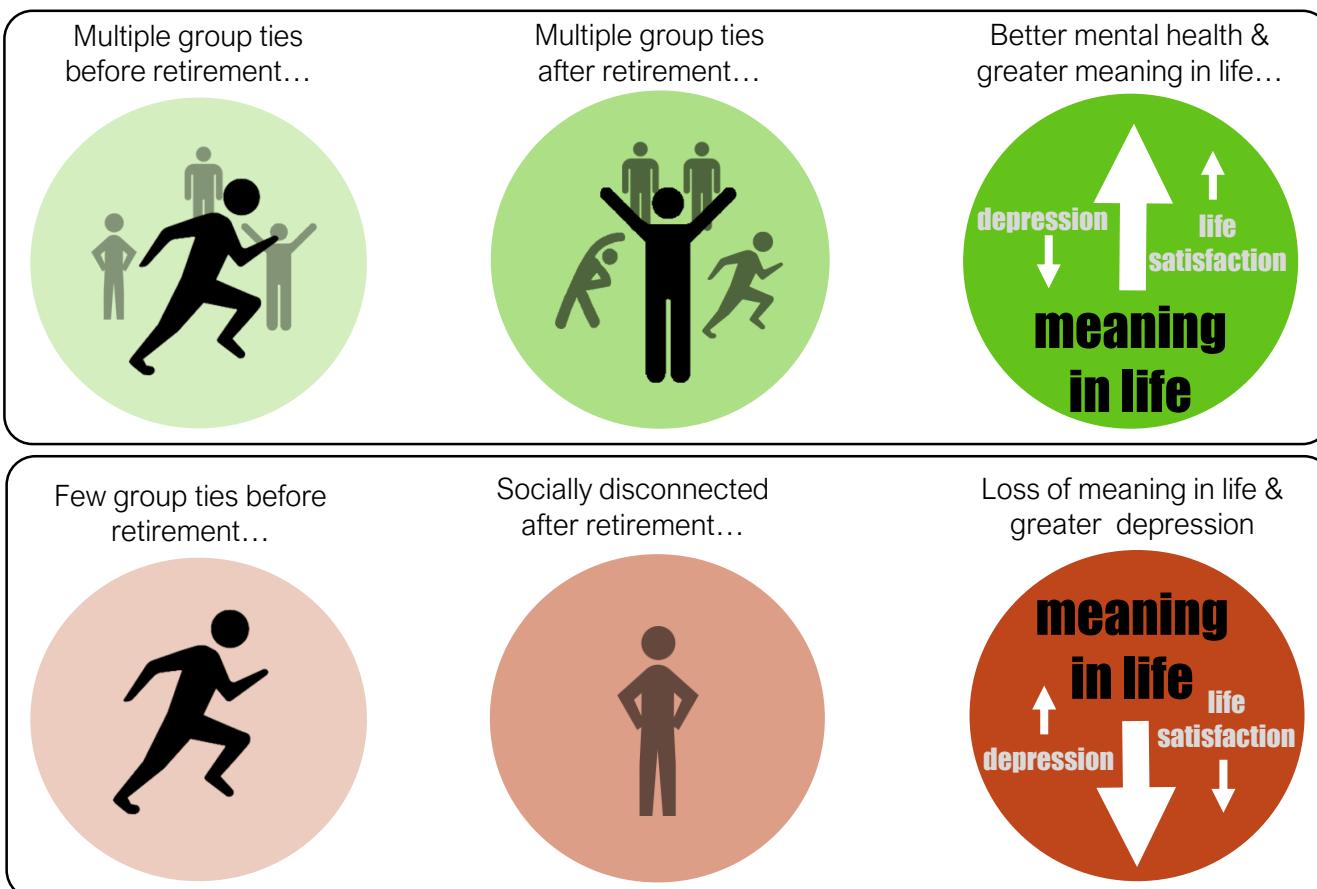
- Average age: 28.79 years
- Age range: 16 to 48
- 60% female
- Average age since retirement: 3.17 years



## CAREER TERMINATION EXPERIENCES



## IDENTITY MANAGEMENT PATHWAYS



## CONCLUSIONS

There are two key predictors of poor adjustment in retirement:

1. **Athletic identity loss**
2. **A lack of meaningful group ties (i.e., weak social identity)**

Both contribute to increasing depression, reducing meaning in life, and undermining well-being.

But with every one point increase in multiple group belonging after retirement, there was a 5% increase in new groups gained and a 5% decrease in depression.

As these data show, social group management is key to adjustment and needs to be the target of any strategy to support athletes in retirement.

## FULL ARTICLE

Haslam, C., Lam, B. C. P., Yang, J., Steffens, N. K., Haslam, S. A., Cruwys, T., Boen, F., Mertens, N., Brandt, K. D., Wang, X., & Fransen, K. (2021). When the final whistle blows: Social identity pathways support mental health and life satisfaction after retirement from competitive sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 57, 102049. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.102049>

Leading research team:



**Contact:** Prof. Catherine Haslam ([c.haslam@uq.edu.au](mailto:c.haslam@uq.edu.au)) or Prof. Katrien Fransen ([Katrien.Fransen@kuleuven.be](mailto:Katrien.Fransen@kuleuven.be))